

THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF SETTING AND CHARACTER IN  
SELECT CONRAD FICTION

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The interdependence of setting and character is particularly evident in Conrad's art. This seasoned seaman turned novelist writes of the subtle interplay of man and his environment with the same avidity and care that the mariner experiences in his daily devotion to the routine of the ship and its preparedness for the exigencies of the sea. As the sailor must keep a relentless vigilance, forever alert to the actualities of the physical world that envelops him, so the writer whose fictional world dramatizes the interrelationship of man and environment must be very sensitive to the setting he creates. Indeed, Conrad appeals to the visual in his "Preface" to The Nigger of the 'Narcissus': "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel--it is, before all, to make you see."<sup>1</sup>

Since the "Preface" to The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' is perhaps Conrad's most succinct declaration on his theory of art, I shall use it to help define the reciprocal interaction of character and setting in his The Nigger of the 'Narcissus', Heart of Darkness, and Nostromo. The less

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Conrad, The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' (New York: Doubleday, 1914), p. 14. Subsequent references to this novel will be to this edition and will be cited in the text.

observing reader may unfairly assume that Conrad's artistic intentions are limited to a mere presentation of surface appearances. But in effect, Conrad's art appeals to the senses as a method of evoking emotional responses from the reader. A closer look at the "Preface" supports these broader claims of Conrad's ultimate artistic purposes. The artist must explore his own "temperament" to discover his innermost feelings, and by communicating these sensations through imagery, he contacts "the other innumerable temperaments" of his readers. In relying on sensual experience and remaining true to his fundamental temperament, the artist "renders the highest kind of justice to the visible universe. . . the aspects of matter," while being informed of "the facts of life." The substance of truth is pursued in "the rescued fragment" of each "convincing moment"--the body of fiction--which discloses the ceaseless and intimate relationship between the tangible universe with "its forms, its colors, its light, and its shadows," and the individual temperament "whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time."

Conrad's discussion in his "Preface" of the interaction of external reality and individual temperament underscores the interdependence of setting and character in his fiction. As becomes increasingly apparent, Conrad's use of setting as a literary device is complicated. His settings

do not merely detail the obtrusive physical features of a region, but capture the capricious shapes and folds that are the effects of light and atmospheric conditions on nature's surfaces. Moreover, Conrad's settings are functional. His settings make deep impressions on the characters who inhabit them, and, as each character receives stimuli from the setting he inhabits, he interprets and responds to his environment in accord with his temperament. This personalizing of the environment often results in a character's distorted impressions of the external world, a buttressing of his egoism, and perhaps illusions.

Since Conrad's imagery conveys his treatment of setting and suggests characters' reactions to environmental circumstances, I would like to clarify the extent and type of imagery involved. The following excerpt from a letter written to Edward Noble accounts for the source of much of Conrad's provocative imagery: "You must squeeze out of yourself every sensation, every thought, every image,--mercilessly, without reserve and without remorse: you must search the darkest corners of your heart, the most remote recesses of your brain,--you must search them for the image, for the glamour, for the right expression."<sup>2</sup> In other words, Conrad researches his very being to respond to his artistic

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Conrad, Letter to Edward Noble October 28, 1895, in Joseph Conrad on Fiction, ed. Walter F. Wright (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), pp. 4-5.

intentions. Likewise, the characters respond to their environment in accord with deep-seated impulses that lie beneath and inform surface reactions. Conrad produces highly imagistic scenes in recording the variant interpretations characters give to elaborate settings. According to Conrad's remarks, his meanings are to be found in this profuse imagery rather than in definitive statement: "Explicitness. . . is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion. . . . Yet nothing is more clear than the utter insignificance of explicit statement and also its power to call attention away from things that matter in the region of art."<sup>3</sup>

Conrad's imagery ranges from those images which directly evoke setting and character to those which are only tangentially germane. On the realistic level Conrad's images lucidly define the physical setting, as well as conjure up the penumbral effects of atmospheric conditions. On the symbolical level the very imagery that defines the physical setting may take on additional meaning if it recurs in a discernible pattern. Conrad comments on the symbolic function in art in a letter to Barrett H. Clark: ". . . a work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it

<sup>3</sup>Wright, Letter to Richard Curle April 24, 1922, p. 39.

acquires a symbolic character."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, besides acknowledging the more conspicuous imagery used to elucidate setting and character, I will identify pertinent emerging patterns of imagery that operate on a symbolic level (e.g., the opposing images of light and dark; land and sea; death and life; shadow and substance).

<sup>4</sup>Wright, Letter to Barrett H. Clark May 4, 1918, p. 36.



## CHAPTER II

### THE NIGGER OF THE 'NARCISSUS'

The structure of The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' underscores the interdependence of setting and character. In this novel Conrad reluctantly admits nature's indifference to man's condition. Diurnal and nocturnal stars frame the setting, suggesting an impenetrable omniscience to the crew. The passage of the Narcissus is attended by all the disrupting vicissitudes of an unpredictable sea. Whereas the crew gains momentary reassurances of its prowess by sustaining the voyage against disquieting seas, the seamen often fear the unpropitious lulls, during which the "immensity" of the sea murmurs nature's magnitude and implies man's diminutive stature. Nature's vastness strikes the crew shortly after their embarkation: "A multitude of stars coming out into the clear night peopled the emptiness of the sky. They glittered, as if alive above the sea; they surrounded the running ship on all sides; more intense than the eyes of a staring crowd, and as inscrutable as the souls of men"(45). After the Narcissus has sailed through largely hospitable seas, a devastating storm imperils the crew, and during the sea's savagery, just as in the earlier torpor of the sea's solemnity, the crew is reminded of nature's supremacy: "Remote in the eternal calm [the stars] glittered hard and cold above the uproar of the earth; they surrounded the

vanquished and tormented ship on all sides: more pitiless than the eyes of a triumphant mob, and as unapproachable as the hearts of men"(94). As the storm dissipates and the floundering Narcissus is arighted, the voyage resumes under less stressful conditions, but again the crew's relief is qualified by nature's insistence on her infinite superiority: "And, again, for long hours [the ship] remained lost in a vast universe of night and silence where gentle sighs wandering here and there like forlorn souls, made the still sails flutter as in sudden fear, and the ripple of a beshrouded ocean whisper its compassion afar--in a voice mournful, immense, and faint. . ."(121). Conrad personifies nature's confident manner. The sky is "peopled" with stars and the ocean confers in voices. In such personifications Conrad suggests the bond uniting nature and man. As nature's most sophisticated species, man has an affinity to nature's elaborate and complex workings. Man exhibits many of nature's qualities. He rejoices at nature's bounty, as he does at the wealth of his own enterprise. He is terrified by nature's raw power, as he is at the power of his own inexplicable, elemental impulses.

The Darwinian attitude of nature's ultimate inaccessibility insinuates itself into Conrad's fiction and letters. In a letter to R. B. Cunningham Graham in January, 1898, Conrad conveys his misgivings of nature's role: "There is let us say a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely

scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold!--it knits. . . . It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair, and all the illusions--and nothing matters."<sup>5</sup> Nature's dominion is unchallengeable and all embracing.

While nature governs from an unapproachable height, her immediate influence on man is direct. In this short novel of five chapters, the storm's place midway in the tale's unfolding is integral to the interaction of character and setting. The storm is a temporary imbalance in nature's quest for a delicate equilibrium, and is a severe punishment for man's pride and dereliction of duty. Robert F. Haugh contends that the novel moves about the alternating situations of "fear and courage, disorder and order, mutiny and punishment," and that these negative and positive forces build through the various confrontations the crew endures: the physical represented by the storm; the political inspired by the mutiny; and the moral imparted by Jim Wait's death.<sup>6</sup> While Haugh's analysis focuses on the three major stresses brought to bear on the crew, it unduly subordinates the storm's impact on a negligent crew. Vernon Young, on the other hand, notes that the weather encountered by the crew

<sup>5</sup>Wright, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup>Robert F. Haugh, Joseph Conrad: A Discovery in Design (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), p. 15.

closely parallels the moral conflicts they undergo.<sup>7</sup> In other words, just as the Narcissus moves from a sea of calm into a sea of duress and then a return to a sea of serenity, so does the crew's situation revolve in a similar though inverted pattern. The periods of environmental calm relax the crew's vigilance, leaving them prey to personal, selfish matters that undermine their readiness to face a potentially ferocious sea. A pacific sea enables the men to embroil themselves in needless problems that create chaos. Conversely, rough seas and difficult navigation force the crew to mitigate their petty concerns and rely on the steadfast virtues of courage, patience, and solidarity. Indeed, nature's phases of calm and chaos often coordinate the crew's responses. For instance, the crew passes through the phases of individual consciousness, depending in large measure on environmental circumstances. Raucous voices of quibbling sailors fill the deck during a hushed sea, but when the sea rages the crew becomes mute. Old Singleton retains his wisdom in silence, becoming garrulous only after the crew is stunned speechless by Jim Wait's death. Indeed, the storm interrupts the gradual disintegration of harmony amid a disgruntled crew and prepares the men for the eventual

<sup>7</sup>Vernon Young, "Trial by Water: Joseph Conrad's The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Nigger of the 'Narcissus', ed. John A. Palmer (Englewood Cliffs: Princeton-Hall, 1969), pp. 25-39.

recognition of certain recondite values.

The major elements of the setting--land, sea, and ship--and Conrad's feelings about them deserve explanation before a discussion of their interaction with character motivation and response. Conrad has definite sentiments about the negative influence of land, since it is characterized in the novel as an arena for the ignoble activities of man. The entire first chapter is comprised of action aboard the Narcissus while she is moored to the land. What Conrad speaks of in the last chapter as "the dissolving contact of the land" is most clearly visible in the desultory behavior of the men as they board the Narcissus during the novel's opening pages. The men are fresh from their subjection to the fragmenting influences of land living. During the mustering of the crew, they show little willingness to orient themselves to the group effort of a sea journey. The negative and divisive attributes of the land are catalogued by Conrad in his musing over why that "savage patriarch" Singleton should be so absorbed in reading Bulwer Lytton's Pelham. Is it, the author asks, because Lytton's story tells "of a resplendent world that exists within the frontier of infamy and filth, within that border of dirt and hunger, of misery and dissipation, that comes down on all sides to the water's edge of the incorruptible ocean . . ."(20-21)? These loathsome qualities of the land are contrasted to the quiet reserve of the resolute Singleton. In the beginning

of the second chapter, the tug that assists the Narcissus out to sea is startled by the sunshine and struggles to get back "into the distant gloom of the land." Near the conclusion of the novel when the Narcissus docks, "the dust of all the continents leaped upon her deck and a swarm of strange men, clambering up her sides, took possession of her in the name of the sordid earth"(182-183).

The vital sea exists in opposition to inert land. Shortly after their abortive mutiny, the crew bequeaths "the problem of life. . .to the sea that knew all, and would in time infallibly unveil to each the wisdom hidden in all the errors, the certitude that lurks in doubts, the realm of safety and peace beyond the frontiers of sorrow and fear. . ."(155). The immensity of the sea is indisputable, as, "stretching away on all sides," the water "merged into the illimitable silence of all creation." Indeed, in its complex arrangement, the sea is a reproduction of the essence of life: "And the immortal sea stretched away, immense and hazy, like the image of life, with a glittering surface and lightless depths"(172).

The ship--the Narcissus--is the medium for the crew's contact with the regenerative influence of the sea. As the men board the Narcissus, the other vessels "at anchor float in perfect stillness under the feeble gleam of their riding-lights, looming up, opaque and bulky, like strange and monumental structures abandoned by men to an everlasting repose"

(129). At the end of her journey, the docked Narcissus resumes her dormancy as she has "ceased to live." But during her voyage the Narcissus takes on human existence; the crew feels warm fellowship with her. Her humanity is in her bearing; she is "beautiful" and has a fault in that she is "exacting." In spite of the moments of intimacy that she and the crew share, the Narcissus is fated for other roles in Conrad's vision. As "the immortal sea confers in its justice the full privilege of desired unrest," the lessons the crew learns from the sea's tests must inevitably be practiced on land. Indeed, in a sense Conrad sees the Narcissus as a surrogate earth: "like the earth which had given her up to the sea, she had an intolerable load of regrets and hopes. On her lived timid truth and audacious lies; and, like the earth, she was unconscious, fair to see--and condemned by men to an ignoble fate"(46). Notably, in this analogy of land and ship, the taint of the land is not innate but infused with the shortcomings of the men who inhabit the land. The incisive Singleton says the same of sailing vessels: "'Ships are all right. It is the men in them'"(38)! In the continuing analogy of land and ship, not only is the Narcissus glimpsed as "a fragment detached from the earth," but even England herself is imagined as a large though anchored craft: "The dark land lay alone in the midst of waters, like a mighty ship bestarred with vigilant lights. . .A great ship! For ages had the ocean battered in

vain her enduring sides; she was there when the world was vaster and darker, when the sea was great and mysterious, and ready to surrender the prize of fame to audacious men. A ship mother of fleets and nations! The great flagship of the race; stronger than the storms! and anchored in the open sea"(180). Similarly, Albert J. Guerard, in his perceptive Conrad the Novelist, sees the Narcissus as a living agent that unifies the novel by virtue of the multiple contexts in which the ship performs. One of the Narcissus' most important roles is to embody a land setting while in transit from her port of origin to her port of destination.<sup>8</sup>

A full appreciation of these components of the novel's setting--land, sea, and ship--can only come when they are brought into focus by the manner in which the novel's characters apprehend and respond to them. We have seen how impressionistic Conrad was in his pejorative description of land and his homage to the sea. It is not surprising to find his characters equally impressionistic and subjective. As little can be said about character divorced from setting in Conrad's fiction as has heretofore been said about setting isolated from character. Indeed, the very first page of the novel introduces the crew as images, etched in environmental shadings, rather than as

<sup>8</sup>Conrad the Novelist (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 124-125.



clear-cut corporeal beings: ". . .silhouettes of moving men appeared for a moment, very black, without relief, like figures cut out of sheet tin"(17). However, in the next few pages of the first chapter, Conrad violates his foreshadowing of a complex interplay of setting and character by descriptively introducing his characters in deceptively simple terms. Singleton is "the incarnation of barbarian wisdom serene in the blasphemous turmoil of the world"(20). Belfast's pugnacity is established as he "seemed in the heavy heat of the fore-castle, to boil with facetious fury" (22). "The two Norwegians sat on a chest side by side, alike and placid, resembling a pair of lovebirds on a perch. . ."(23). Donkin is "an ominous survival testifying to the eternal fitness of lies and impudence"(24). The "dreamy-eyed" Russian Finn sits aloof "with an unconscious gaze, contemplating, perhaps, one of those weird visions that haunt the men of his race"(27). Amid the confusion of Jim Wait's dilatory arrival aboard the Narcissus, he reveals "a face pathetic and brutal: the tragic, the mysterious, the repulsive mask of a nigger's soul"(32).

Conrad's initial, seemingly shallow casting of character in The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' has led some critics to accuse Conrad of over emphasizing the symbolic portents

of the novel to the detriment of characterization.<sup>9</sup> However, Conrad's superficial introduction of his characters in the beginning of The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' does not obscure their latent complexity of personality, which is developed through ensuing experiences. Conrad tells of the self-assertion of his characters in a letter which has specific reference to characters from "The Outcasts of the Islands," but Conrad goes from them to generalizations: "To me they are typical of mankind where every individual wishes to assert his power, woman by sentiment, man by achievement of some sort--mostly base."<sup>10</sup> The individual character's desire "to assert his power" gives the character added dimension. The character's promotion of his self-interest follows his comprehension of how the environment, including interaction with other characters, affects him. This interdependence of setting and character--the impact of setting on character and the character's egoistic impression of the setting's configuration--lays the groundwork for the most complete and

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Moser, in his Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), asserts that Conrad works essentially with three major character types and one minor type: "the simple hero" (e.g. Singleton) is one who follows the dictates of a stringent ethical code and succeeds; "the vulnerable hero" (e.g. Kurtz) is a sensitive person whose imagination transfigures his experience and mobilizes his ultimate failure; "the perceptive hero" (e.g. Marlow in Heart of Darkness) combines traits of the former two types and triumphs as a product of his self-awareness; and finally "the villain" (e.g. Donkin) (pp. 15-16).

<sup>10</sup>Wright, Letter to Edward Garnett September 24, 1895, p. 3.

accurate appraisal of Conrad's method of characterization. Ramon Fernandez, in his essay "the Art of Conrad," discusses the non-verbal dialogue between the environment's impression on the individual and the individual's perception of the external: "The art of Conrad. . .evokes subjectively integrated experiences because the impression is equivalent to the totality of the perception and because the man suffers it in its entirety and with all his might. His great originality is in having applied this impressionism to the awareness of human beings."<sup>11</sup> A close reading of The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' discloses a depth of characterization and setting that Conrad's surface introduction of characters and prejudicial remarks about land and sea do not anticipate. Furthermore, since characters' knowledge arises predominantly from sense experience, an accurate analysis of character in Conrad's fiction requires an appreciation of the association of character and setting.

A study of the light and dark imagery in the novel captures the nuances involved in the interaction of character and setting. Light and dark imagery in the novel functions on several levels. Foremost, the light and dark patterns correspond to the overall structure of the novel. As the crew is mustered, each seaman, "detaching himself

<sup>11</sup>Ramon Fernandez, "The Art of Conrad," in The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium, ed. Robert W. Stallman (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960), p. 9.

from the shadowy mob of heads visible above the blackness of star board bulwarks, [steps] barefooted into the circle of light, and in two noiseless strides [passes] into the shadows on the portside of the quarterdeck"(30). This movement of the men from dark to light and back to dark coincides with previously noted structural ramifications: the movement of the ship from invidious land to chastening sea and back to land; nature's transition from calm to storm to calm; and the crew's change from individual consciousness to group solidarity and their return to egoistic concerns.

Conrad's characters first emerge in mass as "silhouettes," implying that the mergence of character and setting often presents a translucent image. Atmospheric effects of light and dark are not always mutually exclusive, and at times blend into an undifferentiated grey. On other occasions the characters and setting interpenetrate in unexpected but revealing patterns: "Somebody slammed the cabin door to with a kick; the darkness full of menacing mutters leaped with a short clatter over the streak of light, and the men became gesticulating shadows that growled, hissed, and laughed excitedly"(138). In this scene which occurs just after Captain Allistoun's refusal of the sick man Wait's request to return to active sea duty, the characters appear murky and indistinct, befitting the beclouded and unsubstantial motives fueling their clandestine talk of mutiny. Moreover, the interplay of light and dark not only envelops

the character in a diaphanous fold, but also produces a visually nebulous setting in which characters find themselves muddled. In fact, Singleton is one of the few characters who remains clear-sighted: "The flame of the lamp swayed, and the old man, with knitted and bushy eyebrows, stood over the brake, watchful and motionless in the wild saraband of dancing shadows"(40). During the prolonged unnatural calm immediately antecedent to Wait's death, in which "the universe conspired with James Wait," an unsettling atmosphere persists: "And nothing in her was real, nothing was distinct and solid but the heavy shadows that filled her decks with their unceasing and noiseless stir: the shadows darker than the night and more restless than the thoughts of men"(162). At times elements of the environment work in collusion to create confusion: "On the town side the blackness of the water was streaked with trails of light which undulated gently on slight ripples, similar to filaments that float rooted to the shore"(29). Environmental perplexity coincides with the peaked intensity of the storm, as the characters observed an "unnatural and threatening daylight" while "the pitchy obscurity. . .turned a ghastly grey."

Man's activities add to the naturally dynamic environment. His ingenuity alters his world either through the civilization he creates or through the imaginative interpretation he grafts on natural happenings. Before embarking,

"the group swayed, reeled, turning upon itself with the motion of a scrimmage in a haze of tobacco smoke"(19). After the men disembark in London, they are unnerved by the unusual light of the land: "Outside, on Tower Hill, they blinked, hesitated clumsily, as if blinded by the strange quality of the hazy light. . ."(188). In their imaginative interpretation of nature, the characters unjustly impute conscious malice to nature, such as the general reaction of the crew when, during a storm, the last rays of the sun proliferate in "sinister light." The omniscient narrator records further observations of characters succumbing to the powers of their imagination: "Hung-up suits of oilskin swung in and out, lively and disquieting like restless ghosts of decapitated seamen dancing in a tempest"(71). Conrad realizes how subjective man is, and attributes man's vehemence against nature to the disturbed imaginations of his characters. Moreover, although Conrad chiefly associates the traditional values of good and evil with light and darkness in the novel, his insistence on nature's inherent innocence or her lack of conscious culpability in the event of natural disasters is implicit in his treatment of night: "Outside the glare of the steaming forecastle the serene purity of the night enveloped the seamen with its soothing breath, with its tepid breath flowing under the stars that hung countless above the mastheads in a thin cloud of luminous dust"(29). The night caresses rather than imperils.

Consistent with the imagery in the novel, emphasis has been placed on the variegated shadings of light and dark. This is not to discount Conrad's use of the extremes of radiant light and dense darkness, because Conrad establishes these extremities and then builds imagistic patterns within their framework. The bipolar extremes of light and dark co-exist structurally with the beginning and the conclusion of the novel: the story opens under the deep forebodings of night and closes under the bright wash of sunshine. Within the core of the novel light and dark extremities are used to amplify the prodigious effects of the great storm, as the men in the forecastle braced themselves "in the sway of light glaring wildly" while "the world again became a raging, blind darkness that howled, flinging at the lonely ship salt sprays and sleet"(72). Nonetheless, recognizing that the force and beauty of nature lie in her variety, Conrad builds his light and dark imagery largely within the extremities.

The light and dark imagery operates on a realistic level to communicate Conrad's conviction that man's environment is in flux and difficult to comprehend. In addition, Conrad's sensitivity to the archetypal potential of light and dark contrasts prompted him to use certain imagistic patterns of light and dark on the symbolic, as well as realistic, level. Critics have been alert to the symbolic possibilities of such imagery: "The images of light that stir the darkness form screening points that measure the moral

stature of the crew members in respect to their attitude toward the light and their movement within it."<sup>12</sup> In the opening sentence, Baker, the chief mate, strides briskly from his "lighted cabin into the darkness." Baker's unquestionable integrity is sustained throughout the novel, as he is found "peering into dark places" on the Narcissus at the journey's end with no susceptibility to corruption. Likewise, the redoubtable Singleton is first glimpsed sitting "apart on the deck right under the lamps"(20). Shortly afterwards, while the rest of the crew haggles over inconsequential matters, Singleton stands "at the door with his face to the light and his back to the darkness"(38). In contrast, the reprobate Donkin "vanished suddenly out of the light into the dark group of mustered men. . ."(30), showing his alienation to light and affinity to darkness. With his head "way up in the shadows. . ."(31), the malingerer Wait seems to hold counsel with the darkness. Wait "seemed to hasten the retreat of departing light by his very presence. . ."(50). At times, the crew responds collectively to the suggestion of the forces of light and dark, as when the sun set during the sea's upheaval and the voices of the men "went out together with the light." Conrad sparingly illustrates a

<sup>12</sup>Cecil Scrimgeour, "Jimmy Wait and the Dance of Death: Conrad's The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Nigger of the 'Narcissus', ed. John A. Palmer (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 44.



character's mood or predisposition in terms of psychic energy emitted as a light or dark energy field: ". . .a black mist emanated from him [Wait]; a subtle and dismal influence; a something cold and gloomy that floated out and settled on all faces like a mourning veil"(50). The "black mist" is the aura of death and its outward expansion interdicting the lives of the crew becomes a complex psychical interchange between Wait and his mates. When death at last vanquishes Wait in the presence of the back-turned Donkin, the thieving Donkin receives "the irresistable impression of something happening behind his back." Wait's death, coming just after Donkin's vulture-like stealing of Wait's money, links the parasitic action of death to the preying of Donkin on his victim Wait.

This creation of an indefinite ambience for the reader and for Conrad's characters is in keeping with Conrad's implicit skepticism about the possibility of certain knowledge. In such a nebulous and fearful environment, characters, to varying degrees, form their own personal and concretized impressions of the external world. One recalls the earlier cited supposition by Conrad that "every individual wishes to assert his power." Existing in a complicated environment only exacerbates the character's feeling of impotence, causing his withdrawal or inflaming his compulsive need for self-assertion. This need may result in egoism or a self-absorption that obstructs a healthy awareness of one's

relative position in a vast macrocosm. In investigating this propensity toward egoism, a significant correlation emerges between the character's response to situations of light and dark and his commitment to participation in the external world of reality. Those characters who face the light are responsible for the full conditions of their existence; those who find comfort in the lurking shadows of night most often retreat into unreality or solipsism.

Egoism prepares the way for increased illusory and visionary contemplation. In anticipation of his arrival in London, young Creighton foregoes attention to his duty; shortly after the Narcissus leaves Bombay, he invites a teasing illusion: "And he saw in it a long country lane, a lane of waving leaves and dancing sunshine. He saw stirring boughs of old trees outspread, and framing in their arch the tender, the caressing blueness of an English sky. And through the arch a girl in a light dress, smiling under a sunshade, seemed to be stepping out of the tender sky"(36). Under the duress of a convulsed sea, the men seek distraction. "Now and then, by an abrupt and startling exclamation, they answered the weird hail of some illusion; then, again, in silence contemplated the vision of known faces and familiar things"(95).

Conrad notes that man has a faculty for attempting to elude disturbing circumstances by returning "at once to the regions of memory that know nothing of time"(166). But man's

evasion of present responsibilities is momentary. Shortly after land is sighted, tolling the advancing death of Wait, he is found undeterred, "swaggering up the East India Dock Road" in his hallucinatory setting. But fear always returns to prick his egoism. Man's capacity for illusion is so keen that he may dismiss a fact as but another deception. This happens to many of the men who, numbed by the storm, convince themselves that the cook returning with the coffee is but an illusion.

This retreat by characters into egoism and the fanciful flights of illusory thought are consistent with what Conrad's spokesman Marlow concludes in Lord Jim: ". . .it is my belief no man ever understands quite his own artful dodges to escape from the grim shadow of self-knowledge."<sup>13</sup> A perceptive critic concurs: "Man's ideas and ideals are his own creation; he remains cut off from the truth of the universe, in an illusion-filled and dreamlike state, except during those moments of supreme vision when he does encounter the 'darkness'--source and terminus of all life, and the denial of all sensory qualities and human concepts."<sup>14</sup> The "darkness" of The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' is the crew's ultimate recognition of their own mortality. The great storm paves

<sup>13</sup>Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim, ed. Norman Sherry and Thomas Moser (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1968), p. 49.

<sup>14</sup>John A. Palmer, ed., "Introduction," Twentieth Century Interpretations, pp. 4-5.

the way for this recognition by mustering the needed qualities from the crew. But it is Jim Wait's death that shatters illusions: "Jimmy's death, after all, came as a tremendous surprise. We did not know till then how much faith we had put in his delusions. We had taken his chances of life so much at his own valuation that his death, like the death of an old belief, shook the foundations of our society. A common bond was gone; the strong, effective and respectable bond of a sentimental lie"(173). The realization of his own mortality is the "sinister truth" Old Singleton realizes with his collapse after over thirty hours at the helm during the sea's holocaust.

With the incomparable storm, nature challenges the individual character's egoistic assumptions about reality, and reminds man of his inextricable bondage to natural laws in spite of his vivid and rebellious imagination. Conrad has proclaimed the interrelationship between setting and man in many contexts. Another example of their closeness is Conrad's frequent use of animal imagery to describe characters' attributes, which further illustrates man's subjection to the larger order of nature. Conversely, Conrad's personification of natural elements (e.g. sea, wind, etc.) underscores nature's superiority. The storm appears as a human fist and then again as an axe-brandishing man. In this inseparability of character and setting--individual and environment--the storm has a pronounced effect on man, as within the fluidity

of nature one element (sea) chastens another (man). Nature's temporary imbalance--the storm--forces the crew of the Narcissus to pass beyond a life of petty concerns--which is an aspect of man's imbalance--into a recognition of man's formidable responsibility within nature's vast operation. Although the men suffer a lapse in their continued fawning over Wait after the storm subsides, they have approached the dominion of death in their very grappling with an enraged sea. This subliminal impression of the fact of death attends the witnessing of Wait's death, confirming their ultimate recognition of their own mortality. The sea has been at the fore in the novel's overriding concern with the interdependence of setting and character. The sea lashed at the men of the Narcissus and forced their attention away from narcissistic reflection; the sea received the dead Wait and the dissipated delusions fell "upon the heartless sea" much as did the empty words commemorating the deceased.

After docking, the crew remains a "dark knot of seamen." Conrad indicates that man's fateful imagination and needs will put him at odds with his environment. But there is hope. While the "crew of the Narcissus drifted out of sight," the memory of its members returns without its disorienting delusive quality, and with its filaments of the sea chastens the hearts of often forgetful men:

But at times the springflood of memory sets with force up the dark River of the Nine Bends. Then

on the waters of the forlorn stream drifts a  
ship--a shadowy ship manned by a crew of Shades.  
They pass and make a sign, in a shadowy hail.  
Haven't we, together and upon the immortal sea,  
wrung out a meaning from our sinful lives? Good-  
bye, brothers! You were a good crowd. As good a  
crowd as ever fisted with wild cries the beating  
canvass of a heavy foresail; or tossing aloft,  
invisible in the night, gave back yell for yell  
to a westerly gale. (190)

### CHAPTER III

#### HEART OF DARKNESS

In The Nigger of the 'Narcissus', the crew reacted collectively to the vicissitudes of nature. During periods of nature's quiescence, man's egoism and untethered imagination produced conflicts among the men; to combat an unruly sea, the men dismissed their antagonisms. Values earned in the quelling of the sea's rage and permitted to lapse in the storm's aftermath are rekindled in the social crises of mutiny and Wait's death, enabling the men to repudiate their cowardice. Similarly, in Heart of Darkness the characters must respond to nature. The wilderness of Africa is as enigmatic as the sea. And the characters must react to their environment in greater solitude than in Nigger. Marlow remembers that "going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings."<sup>15</sup> This contact with the wilderness augurs civilized man's recognition of his primordial instincts. Kurtz is particularly under the "mute spell of the wilderness--that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and

<sup>15</sup>Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer (New York: The New American Library, 1950), p. 102. Heart of Darkness comprises pages 65-158 in this Signet Classics edition. All subsequent references will be contained in the text.

brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions"(143). Early in the telling of his tale, Marlow mentions his first meeting with Kurtz: "It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me--and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough, too--and pitiful--not extraordinary in any way--not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light"(70). Douglas Hewitt writes that this equation between the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of Marlow's experience illustrates a voyage that is both into the impenetrable darkness of Africa and into the darkness of Marlow's thoughts.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, rather than the omniscient narrator as used in Nigger, Conrad uses the personified observer Marlow who relates his own experiences, which enriches the reader's appreciation of the character's predicament.

Marlow's story is precisely the effect of his journey through the wilderness. But the novel presents two distinct narrative sequences. In the present, Marlow, aboard the cruising yawl Nellie, is describing an episode that he experienced years earlier. Therefore, he brings to the story of his journey the wisdom acquired from its undertaking and

<sup>16</sup>Douglas Hewitt, "Reassessment of Heart of Darkness," in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' and the Critics, ed. Bruce Harkness (San Francisco: Wadsworth, 1960), p. 18.



from his reflection on the experience. However, he realizes that his four auditors will benefit most from his tale if he retraces his earlier journey with a minimum of introductory comment. Presumably, his four listeners are in the same state of naiveté as his earlier self. They must be exposed to the same succession of events the earlier Marlow sustained if they are to experience a growth of awareness similar to his. The critical reader must become involved in the same process if he is to grasp the nature of Marlow's ultimate awareness. Within the context of Marlow's unfolding tale, both settings--civilization and the wilderness--will be examined emphasizing the impact the settings have on Marlow. Marlow delightfully contemplates journeying to Africa's interior. During his interview at the Company's continental offices, Marlow has misgivings that the trip portends some nagging but mysterious elements. As he arrives at the African coast, he struggles with his fumbling reactions to the mysterious wilderness. But these very reactions, informed by his indigenous cultural beliefs, throw civilized attitudes in sharp relief. Marlow alertly begins to notice the ineptitude of the pilgrims' civilized notions and enterprises in the non-receptive jungle. Reaching his inland destination, Marlow meets Kurtz, a European essentially alone among natives. The remainder of Marlow's journey is largely internal and ontological, which Conrad portrays through light and dark imagery. Briefly, Conrad uses a complex

interplay of light and dark imagery to illustrate Marlow's gradual realization of the permanence of natural forces underlying the wilderness as contrasted with the transience of contrived forces sustaining civilization. Then with Kurtz acting as the devil's advocate, Marlow's awakened awareness gains definition.

Marlow begins his recapitulation of his journey by interlocking the present Congo with early England, as he says of his homeland that "this also has been one of the dark places of the earth"(67). Preparing the listeners to see through the transitory, enfeebled imprint a civilized upbringing makes on instinctual motivation, Marlow recounts the likely disillusionment of Roman's colonizing remote, primitive England. As a result, the gloom of the land, which was so remarkable in Nigger, is established again in Heart of Darkness. This gloom presses heavily in the air that "was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth"(65).

After his brief introduction equating early England with the Congo, Marlow launches into one of his "inconclusive experiences." He tells of a pause in his sea going activities, and the rekindling of a boyhood longing to explore the "blank space" charted on a schoolroom map of deepest Africa. Through his aunt's intercession, he is appointed skipper of a river steamboat. He leaves for the

Company's continental offices. In his first sighting of the Company offices, Marlow is awed by their foreboding appearance: "A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting between the stones, imposing carriage archways right and left, immense double doors standing ponderously ajar"(73). During his journey, Marlow might have recognized how this edifice of civilization--the Company offices and neighboring houses--resembled the deep shadows, imposing height, and dead silence of the wilderness itself. But the fact that these implicitly shared qualities project through any architectural civilities establishes the permanence and ubiquity of underlying forces. Indeed, Marlow's trek through the forlorn corridors of the building is a harbinger of his later journey in the wilderness. But at this point, prior to his departure "for the centre of a continent," Marlow senses only a vague, sinister appeal in the presence of the Company offices.

Secure aboard a French steamer, Marlow gets his first glimpse of the African coast and is startled by its primeval rawness: "Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you--smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, 'come and find out.' This one was almost featureless, as if still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous grimness"(77). Once

disembarked Marlow begins his "two-hundred-mile tramp" into the wilds. His initial reaction to the wilderness is a feeling for its profound reality: "And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding [the Company's station] struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion" (89). Like the congeries of voices from the Narcissus that melted into the silence of the sea, the palaver of the pilgrims is absorbed into the stillness of the wilderness, whose deep hush, nonetheless, communicates an imposing, if vague urgency: "All this was great, expectant, mute, while the man jabbered about himself. I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. . . . I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well"(94).

During his early exposure to the wilderness Marlow's acute sensitivity is alerted by the strangeness of the African environment. He is nonplussed. His confusion results from probing the unknown, unlike his fellow pilgrims who merely view the wilderness in terms of their material aspirations. Besides the striking complexity of the wilderness, Marlow's confusion in the apprehension of it is in part the product of the trappings of civilization's conditioning. Marlow eventually evaluates to what degree the mores of society are necessary restraints, but early in his

journey civilized notions inhibit, perhaps fortunately, a penetrating vision of the wilderness' predisposition. Marlow, his four listeners, and the reader must come to terms with this culturally imposed blind spot before the wilderness can be appreciated.

However, Marlow's ethnocentrism diminishes as he sees the failure of civilization's attempts to manipulate the wilderness. Civilization's outposts "seemed to belong to some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister black-cloth" (78). In the "objectless blasting" going on in the first African station he inspects, Marlow notices the puny and unproductive efforts of industrialism to change the contour of the wilderness for commercial reasons: "A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock"(80). Shortly thereafter in his independent tour of the station, he stumbles over the peculiar "wanton smash-up" of imported drainage pipes. Two hundred miles farther into the jungle, Marlow hobbles into the Central Station, where his trip is delayed while the damaged steamer he is to pilot up river is repaired. During his stay Marlow notices the peculiar behavior of the pilgrims who have lived at the station for any duration. While Marlow abjectly watches the hopeless destruction of a burning shed, many of the pilgrims scurry about in desperation: "I was smoking my pipe quietly by my dismantled steamer, and saw them all

cutting capers in the light, with their arms lifted high, when the stout man with moustaches came tearing down to the river, a tin pail in his hand, assured me that everybody was 'behaving splendidly, splendidly,' dipped about a quart of water and tore back again. I noticed there was a hole in the bottom of his pail"(90). This frenetic behavior of the pilgrims stems in large measure from the inapplicability of civilization's laws and social practices in the wilderness, and the pilgrim's inability to alter their life styles to meet new demands.

Civilized law in the jungle is meaningless. Even the natives sense its misdirection: "The natives were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea"(80). Moreover, the pilgrims would initiate a currency-based economy among the natives. The folly of this objective is clearly illustrated in the payment of brass wires to hungry cannibals for their services as crewmen on Marlow's steamer. For numerous reasons the cannibals are unable to barter for provisions in riverside villages, and their ravenous glances prove most disconcerting to the pilgrims. Just as the natives resist senseless, foreign cultural assimilation, the wilderness is equally intransigent to those who approach her on their own terms. For example, the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, commandeered by the Central Station manager's uncle, meets a catastrophic end befitting the motives of the

enterprise, which was "to tear treasure out of the bowels of the land. . .with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe"(99). Once having returned from his journey, Marlow's attentiveness to the shortcomings of exported civilization culminates in his realization of the untenable status of even indigenous civilization:

I found myself back in the sepulchral city  
resenting the sight of people hurrying through  
the streets to filch a little money from each  
other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp  
their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignifi-  
cant and silly dreams. . . . Their bearing, which  
was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals  
going about their business in the assurance of  
perfect safety, was offensive to me like the  
outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a  
danger it is unable to comprehend. (149-150)

Thus far, Marlow's conspicuous observations in his interaction with the two settings--civilization and the wilderness--have been examined. The pilgrims are frustrated in their designs to exploit the wilderness. On the other hand, Marlow is stupefied in his initial contact with the wilderness. To Marlow, the jungle seems an "amazing reality." But the jungle also means the "lurking death," "profound darkness," and "evil," which descend from the impressions of prehistoric

man. Marlow is astonished by the networks of paths that splay out into the jungle: "Paths, paths everywhere; a stamped-in network of paths spreading over the land. . .and a solitude, a solitude, nobody, not a hut"(85). Many of these paths seem to serve no purpose, leading into and ending in desolation; undoubtedly the growth of the wilderness has diverted or halted the continuation of many paths. Symbolically, this "almost featureless" wilderness with its stunted network of paths suggests the tangled maze of the individual unconscious, which Marlow more nakedly engages as he pursues his course. This correlation between jungle maze and internal labyrinth becomes more pronounced as Marlow feels like he is traveling into his past, into his dreams, into the subconscious.

To illustrate these companion mysteries of Marlow's physical and psychological journeys, Conrad uses intricate light-dark imagery. To portray the mysteries of the wilderness and Marlow's subconscious motivations, Conrad reverses the traditional values associated with light and dark. Light, as it is associated with civilization, comes to represent affectation, deception, and illusion. Darkness, as it is associated with the wilderness, remains terrifying but projects permanence and reality. Paradoxically, enlightenment comes from darkness; confusion stems from lightness. In analyzing Marlow's growing confusion in assigning values to light and dark, mirroring his own moral uncertainties,



the reader will be able to empathize with Marlow's quandry.

W. Y. Tindall has written that imagery of light and dark, by which the narrator of the Narcissus reflects his uncertainties, is also useful to Marlow.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Thomas Moser contrasts the ethical tones of light and dark images used in the two novels: in The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' the images of light and dark generally correspond to the traditional values of good and evil; however, in Heart of Darkness the pattern is often reversed and darkness means truth, whereas whiteness is synonymous with falsehood.<sup>18</sup> This fundamental difference in value-image association is manifest in the light and dark imagery constituting the opening and closing passages of the stories. The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' opens with the deck of the Narcissus enshrouded in darkness and closes in a wash of sunshine, which corresponds to the awakening moral awareness of the crew, even if their resoluteness gained at sea is periodically diminished by their idle absorption in egoistic concerns. In contrast, Heart of Darkness opens in lightness as "the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light. . ."(62); and closes in darkness as "the offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil

<sup>17</sup>W. Y. Tindall, "Apology for Marlow," in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' and the Critics, ed. Bruce Harkness (San Francisco: Wadsworth, 1960), pp. 124-25.

<sup>18</sup>Moser, p. 47.

waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky--seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness"(157-58). Yet like the crew of the Narcissus, Marlow likewise moves to a moral awareness. Why then the antithesis in use of light and dark imagery framing Heart of Darkness? Since both novels are premised on the journey motif, the nature of the journeys elicits the imagery used. The Narcissus sailed over the well-traveled course between Bombay and London. The crew was largely composed of veteran sailors, seasoned in the manners of the sea. It was not uncommon to find malefactors like Donkin and Wait, notwithstanding their peculiar idiosyncracies, aboard a merchant vessel. Moreover, the crew's mettle is aroused by external pressure--the sea, and only sporadically does the crew internalize attributes of the environment. In a sense, the crew's disregard of the sea until challenged is like the pilgrims' disavowal of the nature of the wilderness. However, this is not the case with a Marlow or a Kurtz. Their excursions into darkest Africa are nearly unprecedented; in fact, Marlow is a neophyte at such inland passage. The unusual mystery of the wilderness impinges upon Marlow's and Kurtz's sensitivities. Unlike the crew of the Narcissus, who shed their "highly humanized, tender, complex, excessively decadent" traits and reaffirm the "meaning of life" because of the external pressure of the sea's force, Marlow and Kurtz actively internalize the more subtle vagaries of the

wilderness. They confront the forces of nature and human nature. However, Kurtz stubbornly refuses to acknowledge his kinship with the primitive attributes of the wilderness. His revelation comes as a death-poignant epiphany--"that supreme moment of complete knowledge." Shortly after crying out, "'the horror! The horror!'" he dies. Meanwhile, Marlow's conclusion is reached through the more passive means of cumulative observation rather than debilitating participation--"I didn't go ashore for a howl and a dance"(106). These two men gain insights into the primal impulses of their own natures as mirrored in the elemental energies of the wilderness. Their ultimate concession that civilized refinements merely mask strong and irrational urges in man forces a re-definition of values, which is illustrated in the seemingly topsy-turvy symbolic use of light and dark imagery. The darkness of the wilderness sheds light on, or is instructive of, general principles incarnate in the nature of life. On the other hand, the light of civilization actually casts the shadow of illusion, which man grasps to delude himself into a feeling of exaggerated self-worth. The complexity of these issues is indirectly advanced in terms of "glow" and "haze" by the astute auditor who says that to Marlow the "meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the

spectral illumination of moonshine"(68).

Marlow establishes the permanence and ubiquity of darkness, emblematic of primal forces, in his opening parallel between ancient England and the contemporary Congo: "Light came out of this river [Thames] since--you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker--may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday"(68). However, this is Marlow reflecting on his journey. The earlier Marlow feels his first misgivings in his run-in with the two women receptionists knitting "black" wool in the Company offices. But undaunted, he emerges ready to start his journey, feeling "something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle"(76). Having first stayed for any length of time in one of his Company's African stations, thirty miles up the Congo River, Marlow is motivated by a different light--"the blinding sunshine of that land"--that illuminates a premonition: "But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly"(81). Yet shortly thereafter, in his meeting with the Company's chief accountant, Marlow is impressed with this man who in the "great demoralization of the land. . .kept up his appearance"(83). Marlow respects the starched collars and impeccable cleanliness of

the man, neglectful of the deplorable treatment of emaciated blacks but a stone's throw away. At this point Marlow is still betrayed by his mistaken identification of the superficial, dazzling light of civilized refinement with reality.

The next day after his encounter with the chief accountant, Marlow continues his journey inland. Fifteen days and two hundred miles later he enters the Central Station. Delayed by the mishap of his sunken steamer, Marlow learns more about Kurtz through the hearsay of petulant agents and pilgrims. Countering their biased opinions, Marlow comes across a revealing painting, conceived by Kurtz only a year before in this very station. The painting "arrested me," concedes Marlow. A blindfolded woman is portrayed moving hesitantly through a sombre darkness with but a flickering light to contest the absorbing darkness. Marlow does not relate a particularized impression, but the baleful tone communicated by the painting certainly strikes him. The full meaning of the painting is realized by the alert reader, and most probably Marlow, in retrospect, after his meeting with Kurtz. Kurtz's painting may be interpreted as man groping through the dark meaninglessness of his world, clutching the circumscribed light civilization can muster. But in a sense this light also betrays the sinister demeanor of man--"the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister"--just as scorching sunlight illuminated the abject state of the exploited natives. Nonetheless, Marlow is

repeatedly unnerved by the insufficiency of the "sunlit face of the land" to penetrate the "profound darkness of its heart."

Confronted by the enigmatic wilderness, the fatuous pilgrims ignore it, yet in their avarice give free reign to the primitive instincts which they had so presumptuously dismissed. On the other hand, we have witnessed Marlow's questioning attitude grow in measure with his journey inland. Moreover, in acclaiming light but facing darkness, Marlow is subject to the growing conviction that the darkness of Kurtz and the forest may be his own, or that in the confusion of light and dark he can no longer distinguish the import of one from the other, which is a cause for further anxiety.<sup>19</sup> As Marlow re-defines the values he once associated with light and dark, he comes to some startling conclusions. For instance, Marlow is horrified at the mounted skulls promenaded before Kurtz's quarters, but finds their presence less appalling than the prospect of listening to Kurtz's Russian assistant elaborate on the various postures the natives assumed in approaching the deified Kurtz; dismemberment and the shrinkage of heads suddenly appeals as "uncomplicated savagery. . .that had a right to exist--obviously--in the sunshine"(133-34). No wonder in this confusion of light and dark, darkness in "white fog" seems non-contradictory: "When the sun rose there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and

<sup>19</sup>Tindall, p. 129.

more blinding than the night"(110). This paradoxical darkness in white fog succinctly parallels Marlow's uncertainty about the nature and direction of his own values. He entered the wilderness as an emissary of "light," persuaded by the fundamental Victorian belief that modern man's ostensible progress had severed him from the primitive urges that had been his early ancestor's bane. But the wilderness betrays the shallowness of civilized values. Marlow feels a kinship with the natives: "They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity--like yours--the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar"(105). Indeed, the dark rituals of the natives illuminate at least his recognition of the thrust of non-rational impulses within his own being. Conversely, he accepts that the "light" of civilization is really only disguised dark practices of imperialism and the tacit proclamation of a false superiority.

Naturally, Marlow does not readily divest himself of his ingrained beliefs. In his increasing confusion of values, mirrored in the light-dark imagery, Marlow begins to have the sensation of living "another existence," in which his past comes to him as "an unrestful and noisy dream":

The broadened waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against the shoals, trying to find the channel,

till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once-- somewhere--far away--in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered in wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. (103)

What was once the domain of his dreams becomes reality, while his former everyday consciousness seems but a dream; he is traveling into his past, into his dreams, into the subconscious. Having reached the deeper recesses of his being and shed prior cultural indoctrination, while retaining tenuously the self-realizing potential of rationality, Marlow is prepared to reach some conclusion about the nature of self and external reality, or like Kurtz be impersonally subsumed in the non-rational forces of instinctual motivation. Cut off from comprehension of his surroundings, Marlow searches for means to restore his bearings: "Sometimes I would pick out a tree a little way ahead to measure our progress towards Kurtz, but I lost it invariably before we got abreast. To



keep the eyes so long on one thing was too much for human patience"(109). If the density of the wilderness wearies Marlow's attention, the travel towards Kurtz reaffirms his purpose; for Marlow, the steamboat "crawled towards Kurtz--exclusively." Ironically, Marlow looks forward to Kurtz explaining the unintelligible.

Earlier in the novel, Marlow envisions Kurtz as a man of commitment, "a fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own sake"(101). Later, appalled at Kurtz, Marlow seeks refuge in an "infernal mess of rust, filings, nuts, bolts, spanners, hammers, ratchet-drills"--tangible realities. But in the vexing wilderness, Marlow often used work as a balm; repairing the sunken steamer had occupied him for some months. Finding Kurtz disturbing and impenetrable like the wilderness, Marlow again distracts himself with simple tasks. Work is manageable; an activity Marlow can control. But work only orders surface arrangement. Meanwhile, unaffected by surface incidents, an inner reality broods throughout the novel: "When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality--the reality, I tell you--fades. The inner truth is hidden--luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same. . ."(103). Conrad investigates the appearance-versus-reality theme in the contrast of civilization with the wilderness, in the pilgrims' frustrations, in light-dark imagery, and in Marlow's escapism in work; all framed within the leitmotif of Marlow's

external-internal (physical-psychological) journey.

Kurtz's relationship to the appearance-reality issue is crucial to Marlow's realizing his self-potential while he is seeking to know accurately his environment. Anticipating a man of dignified and disciplined aspirations, Marlow finds Kurtz obdurate and impassioned. Nonetheless, Marlow is at first fascinated by Kurtz's voice that was "grave, profound, vibrating, while the man did not seem capable of a whisper"(136). Kurtz's eloquence captivates the Russian harlequin, but Marlow suspects insincerity. Talkativeness glosses over a perverse communion with the wilderness: "The wilderness had patted him on the head, and behold, it was like a ball--an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and--lo!--he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favourite"(121). Some deficiency had left Kurtz prey to the "powers of darkness." He had succumbed only to discover the inadmissible--the surrender of his personal freedom. His flamboyance vainly relieved, as well as masked, his loss. Significantly, in this duality between private self and public performance, Kurtz reflects the dichotomy between reality and appearance that confounds Marlow throughout his African stay. Initiate and poseur, Kurtz makes immediate the wilderness' potential effect on character, as well as the shallowness of outward

show. Marlow can follow Kurtz in self-indulgence though loss of self-control, or he can learn from Kurtz's impetuosity and through restraint and observation engage the environment yet retain his separateness.

Marlow puts Kurtz in perspective. Even after Marlow's return to civilization, Kurtz still lived before him; ". . . he lived as much as he had ever lived--a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence"(152). A clear appreciation of Kurtz helped Marlow elude the "irresistably fascinating" whisper of the wilderness, as Marlow states that "it is his Kurtz's extremity that I seem to have lived through"(149). Marlow sums up the ordeal as well as the fruition of that "extremity": "True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all the truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible"(149). Marlow places his retracted foot back on earth, which for him in the light of his awareness has truly become "a place to live in, where we must put up with sights, with sounds, with smells, too, by Jove!--breathe dead hippo, so to speak, and not be contaminated"(122).

## CHAPTER IV

### NOSTROMO

Robert Penn Warren has written that "as the earlier fiction seems to move toward Nostromo, so later fiction seems to represent by and large, specializations and elaborations of elements that had been in suspension in that work."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in Nostromo Conrad perfects techniques he developed in his earlier novels The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' and Heart of Darkness. Wilfred S. Dowden observes that images involving content and patterns similar to those of Heart of Darkness constellate about the pervasive image of silver in Nostromo; those images include: clouds, darkness, light, and glaring sunshine.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, the imagery now functions within a different fictional framework. As Guerard notes, the great difference between Nostromo and many of Conrad's earlier works is that Nostromo "is not to the same degree an 'interior' novel, either for the characters or for the reader."<sup>22</sup> This change in emphasis is not a defect when subsumed in the broad fictional canvas that is Nostromo's

<sup>20</sup>Joseph Conrad, Nostromo, Intro. Robert Penn Warren (New York: The Modern Library, 1951), p. xi. Subsequent references to the text are to this Modern Library edition.

<sup>21</sup>Wilfred S. Dowden, Joseph Conrad: The Imaged Style (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1970), p. 94.

<sup>22</sup>Guerard, p. 176.

achievement. Robert Penn Warren reminds us that in Nostromo "Conrad endeavored to create a great, massive, multiphase symbol that would render his total vision of the world, his sense of individual destiny, his sense of man's place in nature, his sense of history and society"(xxvii). Warren indirectly acknowledges the interaction of character and setting as fundamental to the comprehensive vision of the world that Nostromo renders. And within this construct, "society" functions as a major element of setting. Nostromo contains a more complete analysis of character involvement with community than either The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' or Heart of Darkness. Therefore, this chapter will change focus accordingly, examining Conrad's fuller treatment of character interaction with society.

In his "Note" prefacing Nostromo, Conrad recalls his inspiration for writing the novel. A short episode in a sailor's autobiography reminds him of his brief, youthful contact with South America. He remembers the following fragments of his South American exposure: "bits of strange coasts under the stars, shadows of hills in the sunshine, men's passions in the dusk, gossip half-forgotten, faces grown dim. . ."(3). Remarkably, Conrad recollects features of the setting first and immediately envisions character portrayal next. The interrelationship of setting and character dawns in his casting of Nostromo "in the changing scenes of a revolution," which in turn generates a more

detailed impression "of a twilight country which was to become the province of Sulaco. . ."(4). From such humble origins commences an elaborate interdependence of setting and character that helps reveal what Warren calls "one of the few mastering visions of our historical moment and our human lot"(xxxix).

As with The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' and Heart of Darkness, Conrad painstakingly creates his physical setting. The major elements of the physical setting include: the port of Sulaco; the Golfo Placido; the cape Punta Mala and its companion peninsula of Azuera, which lie parallel and jut out into the sea to form the borders of the Golfo Placido; the three islets, "The Isabels," which populate the gulf; the Camp consisting of the plains that stretch from Sulaco to the foothills of the Cordillera mountain range; Higuerota Mt. that rises majestically above its rocky peers; and above all the San Tome gorge that seals the precious silver that is so widely coveted. These aspects of the setting are delineated in the novel's opening pages.

The timelessness and natural beauty of Sulaco are established at the outset. Orange gardens testify to Sulaco's antiquity and its remoteness. Sulaco's isolation is enhanced by its physical location: "Sulaco had found an inviolable sanctuary from the temptations of a trading world in the solemn hush of the deep Golfo Placido as if within an enormous semicircular and unroofed temple open to the

ocean, with its walls of lofty mountains hung with the mourning draperies of cloud"(3). The prevailing calms of the gulf bar navigation of sailing vessels. In sequestering Sulaco, Conrad creates a microcosmic setting, establishing the continuity and beauty of a natural state preserved from the commercial intrusion of man. The fundamental qualities of nature--permanence, beauty, and indifference to man--are accounted for. However, the introduction of steam power defeats the gulf's natural prohibition of maritime trade: "Year after year the black hulls of theirships had gone up and down the coast, in and out, past Azuera, past the Isabels, past Punta Mala--disregarding everything but the tyranny of time" (9). Man's commercial interests, his violations of nature's sanctity, are anticipated. The interrelationships of man and nature will transpire in a setting purposely secluded by Conrad, where events of magnitude achieve a purity that only a self-sustaining, insulated setting can ensure.

Conrad burdens his setting with specific implications for the interaction of character and setting. The Azuera peninsula is arid and disfigured with dry ravines and rocky declivities. Azuera's utter devastation terrifies the common people, who believe forbidden treasures curse the peninsula. Furthermore, tradition tells of a procession of adventurers who have perished in search of gold on Azuera. Two gringos in particular remain legendary inhabitants of Azuera, lingering spectres in the custody of the wealth that

once charmed them. The barrenness of Azuera and the plight of the lingering gringos point to the subsequent, amplified misfortunes of a land--Sulaco--denigrated by revolutions, and the miseries of individuals whose ideals are sacrificed in the plunder for wealth and power. In addition, Azuera suggests two disparate points in the earth's evolution. Glimpsed at a distance, Azuera appears as a "patch of blue mist" afloat. Closer inspection reveals an antithetical hardness of composition. Substituting a temporal sequel for this spatial ordering of Azuera, the initial "patch of blue mist" represents, in the evolutionary sense, a gaseous mass preceding solidification into land. Thus, the reader gains an historical continuity of the region, and ceases to think of the area only in terms of its relatively small geographic size. Conflicting with this scientific view is the people's fable, which blames the presence of and historic search for gold on Azuera as the source of the peninsula's blight. Uncannily, this popular superstition is enacted in Sulaco with greater consequence and human sacrifice. It is not inconceivable that some day the rapine of Sulaco will leave it as devastated as Azuera. Even the subtle methods of industrialization take their toll: "Charles Gould said, presently: 'All this piece of land belongs now to the railway company. There will be no more popular feasts held here'" (136). On the individual level, enslaved by his buried treasure, Nostromo acts out the fabled role of his gringo

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counterparts. In short, Conrad's opening treatment of Azuera foreshadows significant events and thematic concerns developed in his novel.

The remainder of Conrad's opening survey of the setting is an equally important precursor to the reader's understanding of Nostromo. Conrad emphasizes nature's inscrutability and indifference to man, while suggesting man's infinitesimal knowledge of nature's operations. The capricious airs of the generally becalmed gulf toy unnervedly with sailing vessels. Opaque clouds often steal the sunrise long delayed by the Cordillera Mountain peaks. Having once gained sky-high freedom, the sun's salvos dissipate the very clouds that might have purchased relief from the heat. At night the clouds return to smother the gulf in an impenetrable and disorienting darkness. These tensions of nature between light and dark, heat and cold, dry and wet have their correspondence in the contradictory motivations and sanguinary struggles besetting human nature. For instance, Nostromo harbors the contradictory impulses of realizing personal fame and fortune while espousing material and social betterment for his cargadores based on the selfless principles of Giorgio Viola's idealism. Having established an unsettling ambience, Conrad closes his initial depiction of setting with the islets "The Isabels." The three Isabels represent the range of conditions within a natural state. As the smallest, the Hermosa is "a mere flat top of a gray rock"(8).

Next in size, the Little Isabel can boast of only a scraggly palm tree. However, the Great Isabel "has a spring of fresh water issuing from the overgrown side of a ravine"(8). Like a play within a play, this ravine on the Great Isabel becomes the repository of a silver treasure. This buried treasure overlords the life of Nostromo, just as its counterpart the silver-lined San Tome gorge determines the policies of public institutions throughout Sulaco. While the silver's existence is instrumental in determining the destiny of man and society in Sulaco, in effect the specious values man attributes to silver cause his undoing. These values include the abstract notions derived from the mystique of silver, such as its meretricious worth in Gould's conception of a stable and just society, or on an individual level, Nostromo's desire for dignity. Both men distort the actual environment in focusing on a single physical feature--silver--which disrupts their potential interdependence with a unified setting.

This symbolic interdependence of setting and character, or character frustration of such, persists beyond the opening documentation of the setting. Conrad associates images from the natural setting with individual characters to augment character development, delineate character behavior, and account for the social consequence of such behavior.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Charles J. McCann and Victor Comerchero in "Setting As a Key to the Structure and Meaning of Nostromo," Research

Conrad links Gould to the gorge, Viola to Higuerota, Decoud to the gulf, and Nostromo to all of them. Gould, a man of action and mentor of material interests, is properly associated with the San Tome gorge. His inflexible allegiance to the belief that silver production will build a just and self-sufficient community fails to appreciate the complexity of factors leading to a wholesome society. Gould destroys his noble ideal in his relentless pursuit of community stability as an outgrowth of his misplaced faith in material interests. In such preoccupation, he estranges himself from his wife, becoming as impervious to her entreaties as the granite-like silver ore is to those who would mine it. Giorgio Viola's symbol is the mountain Higuerota. From Viola's frequent ruminating on his participation in Garibaldi's struggle to "liberate" his fellow Italians, the reader learns of this old expatriate's inveterate idealism. To emphasize Viola's unfettered idealism, Conrad connects Viola's qualities with those of Higuerota, "whose cool purity seemed to hold itself aloof from a hot earth"(29). Viola is proud and remote like

Studies, 34 (1966), 66-84, anticipate some of my arguments. Moreover, in the opening paragraphs of their article, McCann and Comerchero briefly chronicle ways in which Conrad uses images from the setting in his early novels, supporting some of the contentions I have documented in the first two chapters of this study. The following uses of images from Conrad's settings are listed: "(1) as a vehicle of oblique authorial comment upon a particular character, (2) as a reflector of the action, (3) as an object to which a particular character and no other reacts, and (4) as a subjective ingredient of a particular character's perceptions, fears, hallucinations"(67).

the mountain. Furthermore, Conrad explicitly relates Viola to the visage of Higuerota: "There were three doors in the front of the house, and each afternoon the Garibaldino could be seen at one or another of them with his big bush of white hair, his arms folded, his legs crossed, leaning back his leonine head against the lintel, looking up the wooded slopes of the foot-hills at the snowy dome of Higuerota"(28). The tie between the abstract qualities evident in Higuerota and possessed by Viola is demonstrated again in Viola's neglect of his family, as his idealism distracts him from the very place--the hearth--where his principles could be applied: "'Go to your mother,' he said. 'They are growing up as I am growing older, and there is nobody--' He looked at the young engineer and stopped, as if awakened from a dream; then, folding his arms on his breast took up his usual position, leaning back in the doorway with an upward glance fastened on the white shoulder of Higuerota far away"(188). With his idealistic disposition undermining his grasp of fact, Viola's aloofness from the community is as damaging to Sulaco as Charles Gould's obeisance to the fact of the silver's existence.

The third of these paired relationships concerns Conrad's coupling Decoud with the Golfo Placido. The inter-relationship between Decoud and the gulf is not imaged as methodically by Conrad as his juxtaposition of images of natural setting with Gould and Viola. But Decoud's suicide

in the "solemn hush of the deep Golfo Placido" is a narcissistic act of self-destruction, in which Decoud's skepticism is mirrored blankly in the deep, dark, quiet opacity of the gulf. In the silent and windless vacuum of the gulf, Decoud's skepticism has no object but himself, and in turning it inward, he discovers the essential barrenness of his soul, which bears striking resemblance to the aridity of the gulf. Finally, Conrad links the character Nostromo to all three of the prior mentioned image-character associations. Since Nostromo and his interaction with the setting are important in several ways, treatment of Nostromo in this regard will be postponed until its impact can be more fully appreciated.

Such symbolic associations between character and setting underscore the roles of characters actively engaging their environment. Central to the novel in placement and meaning is Decoud and Nostromo's nighttime expedition into the foreboding regions of the Golfo Placido. Ostensibly, they seek to salvage a treasure of silver that will subsequently implement Sulaco's secession from Costaguana. But their voyage is to involve existential propositions far surpassing the political disposition of Sulaco. Decoud vaguely anticipates this prior to embarking: "Looking out of the window, Decoud was met by a darkness so impenetrable that he could see neither the mountains nor the town, nor yet the buildings near the harbor; and there was not a sound, as if the tremendous obscurity of the Placid Gulf, spreading from

the waters over the land, had made it dumb as well as blind" (254). In the cacophony of Sulaco's socio-political disintegration, the obscurity of the gulf thunders silently. Is there a fundamental truth in the solemn austerity of the gulf? The wisdom of the gulf is precisely its emptiness. As stated early in the novel, "sky, land, and sea disappear together out of the world when the Placido--as the saying is--goes to sleep under its black poncho"(7). The trespasser of the gulf is left in stark confrontation of a reality shorn of all but his soul. As Decoud and Nostromo go forth into the blackness of the gulf, Decoud feels like he has been "launched into space." Except for surviving thoughts he has the sensation of sleep, of death's foretaste of eternal peace. Decoud loses his sense of separateness, as his soul is osmotically absorbed into the darkness. Decoud regains momentary reassurance of his worldly existence when Nostromo ignites a candle to make a course by compass, but as soon as Nostromo extinguishes the candle, Decoud's existential anxiety resumes: "It was to Decoud as if his companion had destroyed by a single touch the world of affairs, of loves, of revolution, where his complacent superiority analyzed fearlessly all motives and all passions, including his own"(305). "No intelligence could penetrate the darkness of the placid gulf"(305-06). Decoud's suspension temporally, spatially, and existentially is so complete "that it was only by leaning over the side and feeling the

water slip through his fingers that Decoud convinced himself they were moving at all"(307). With this scene Conrad accomplishes a tour de force. Decoud and Nostromo are transported from the temporality of Sulaco to the timelessness of the gulf. Their experience in the gulf demonstrates nature's magnitude, indifference to man, and timelessness--qualities Conrad underscored in his initial panorama of the setting. Besides harking back to the novel's beginning, this centrally placed scene foreshadows the issues of the novel's close. The novel ends with Linda Viola's "true cry of love and grief that seemed to ring aloud from Punta Mala to Azuera and away to the bright line of the horizon. . ."(631). Her exasperated cry, straining into the peripheral silence of the horizon, echoes with a finality man's diminutive posture in the breadth of nature's dominion.

Having placed them in a void--the gulf--Conrad fore-stalls the outcome of Decoud and Nostromo's predicament. Decoud's suicide and Nostromo's return to Sulaco are postponed for several chapters. Once again the story picks up the mundane political issues occurring in Sulaco. But the gulf scene underscores how nature operates independent of man's assumptions and designs. Nonetheless, man seeks to reduce nature's transcendence; he needs to order his experience with nature on a comprehensible level. Decoud's intellectuality and Nostromo's vanity are methods for the meaningful rendering of experience. But these methods are futile in

dealing with the vacuity of the gulf that envelops them in womb-like numbness, the very blankness of which seems charged with an indefinable intention. The gulf is devoid of the visible referents that sustained Decoud's intellectuality and Nostromo's vanity in a social setting. In other words, the gulf situation demonstrates man's needs to order his experience and the glaring incapacity of his tools to do so. Conrad's immediate return to the Sulaco situation dramatizes the social consequences of characters irresponsibly imposing secular values on natural processes. Specifically, Conrad examines the egoistic ways characters relate to the San Tome mine. To justify their self-centeredness, some characters (e.g. Gould) espouse a self-idealization and a commitment to a glorified ideal; other characters (e.g. Sotillo) disdain justification and simply resort to outright greed. Conrad is most intrigued with a character like Gould, who shapes his environment to conform with personal convictions.

Having inherited the potentially productive San Tome mine, Charles Gould is in a position to implement his ideas:

What is wanted here is law, good faith, order, security. Any one can declaim about these things, but I pin my faith to material interests. Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist. That's



how your money-making is justified here in the face of lawlessness and disorder. It is justified because the security which it demands must be shared with an oppressed people. A better justice will come afterwards. That's your ray of hope. (92-93)

Gould's manipulation of the natural setting echoes in his imagination on his first visit to the sight of the then dormant mine. On this occasion the thrashing "thread of a slender waterfall" triggers in Gould's mind the "growling mutter of the mountain pouring its stream of treasure under the stamp. . ."(116). Gould's imaginative vision of rattling ore shoots is soon realized at the expense of the waterfall: "The waterfall existed no longer. . . . Only the memory of the waterfall, with its amazing fernery, like a hanging garden above the rocks of the gorge, was preserved in Mrs. Gould's water-color sketch; she had made it hastily one day from a cleared patch in the bushes, sitting in the shade of a roof of straw erected for her on three rough poles under Don Pepe's direction"(117). Claire Rosenfield sees this deliberate paralleling of a stream of water and a stream of silver as indicative of how the phenomenal world has been interpreted and maligned by the advocates of material interests.<sup>24</sup> Another suggestive image occurs to Don Pepe,

<sup>24</sup>Claire Rosenfield, Paradise of Snakes: An Archetypal Analysis of Conrad's Political Novels (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 52.

the trustworthy general foreman of the mine, who upon looking up the gorge declares to Mrs. Gould, "'Behold the very paradise of snakes, senora'"(116). Labelling the mine a "paradise of snakes" is an example of what Northrup Frye calls "demonic modulation," or the deliberate reversal of the customary moral associations of archetypes. The phrase "paradise of snakes" creates a tension in that "paradise" conjures up **beatific** images which are then exploded by the connotations of the word "snakes." This uncusomary juxtaposition of archetypes (paradise-snakes) corresponds to the tension aroused in a captivated character looking into the silver-lined gorge. On seeing the silver the beholder rejoices in euphoria (paradise), which he must then reconcile with subsequent avarice (snake-like passion). In another sense, "paradise of snakes" is equivalent to the "demonic human world" which according to Northrup Frye "is a society held together by a kind of molecular tension of egos, a loyalty to the group or the leader which diminishes the individual, or, at best contrasts his pleasure with his duty or honor."<sup>25</sup> If the equilibrium of society is disrupted, as designs for silver and foreign intervention conspire to weaken social consensus in Sulaco, then forces (ideologies, revolutionaries) are unleashed to re-define and restore social equipoise.

<sup>25</sup>Northrup Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 147-48.

Later, during Sulaco's revolution, Mrs. Gould says: "'We have disturbed a good many snakes in that paradise, Charley, haven't we?'"(231). She implies a meaning consistent with Frye's "tension of egos." Only in this case the tension has been disturbed sufficiently to destroy social harmony.

Again the fable of Azuera, with its scaled down "paradise of snakes," finds its analogue in the larger dimension of Sulaco society. However, the "paradise of snakes" symbol achieves full implication in Nostromo's groveling over his ravine-buried treasure, which will be discussed later. With his restricted vision, Gould misses the implications of his wife's remark, as he needlessly points out that the gorge has changed since his wife's sketch. He protests that since mankind has been brought into it, the gorge is no longer a "paradise of snakes." Physically, the snakes have been routed, but symbolically the "paradise of snakes" persists as an analogue of the snake-like, demonic passions awakened in exploitation of the mine.

While the moral revulsion communicated in "paradise of snakes" escapes Charles Gould, he still insists on rationalizing his San Tome enterprise. Decoud cites Gould's need to idealize his motives and the mine: "'Mrs. Gould, are you aware to what point he has idealized the existence, the worth, the meaning of the San Tome mine? Are you aware of it?'"(237). Mrs. Gould responds feebly with a question, not contesting the point which Decoud amplifies: "'Simply that

he cannot act or exist without idealizing every simple feeling, desire, or achievement. He could not believe his own motives if he did not make them first a part of some fairy-tale'"(237). In time Gould's self-idealization evolves into a personal credo having all the credibility of an established fact. As Decoud remarks, sentiment is a necessary agent to this self-delusion: "Their sentiment was necessary to the very life of my plan Decoud's separatist plan of making Sulaco an independent state<sup>7</sup>; the sentimentalism of the people that will never do anything for the sake of their passionate desire, unless it comes to them clothed in the fair robes of an idea"(265). As the San Tome mine becomes threatened by the converging land and sea forces of Pedro Montero and Sotillo, Charles Gould delivers himself over to his idealized abstractions and plans a provincial revolution to preserve the material interests within Sulaco, sanctioning civil strife that the material interests were supposedly geared to end: "Charles Gould's fits of abstraction depicted the energetic concentration of a will haunted by a fixed idea. A man haunted by a fixed idea is insane. He is dangerous even if that idea is an idea of justice; for may he not bring the heaven down pitilessly upon a loved head?" (422). Indeed, in his absorption with the fate of the mine, Gould does bring down the weight of his inattention upon Emilia's unstinted fidelity. She had watched her husband's interest in the mine with "misgivings turning into a fetish,

and now the fetish had grown into a monstrous and crushing weight"(245). Unable to relate to the humane presence of his wife on a personal level, Charles Gould is equally incapable of relating to others on a collective level. Enslaved by abstractions deduced from his erroneous impression of the significance of the mine, Gould abrogates meaningful ties with the community setting.

Martin Decoud is a major character with an exceedingly complex personality. His intense skepticism and imagistic association with the barren gulf have been mentioned. However, Conrad makes as much of Decoud's redeeming qualities, which will be reviewed momentarily, as his skepticism. Unlike many of the other characters, Decoud's skepticism, piercing the often unquestioned assumptions of life, would seem likely to enable him to meet life realistically within a developing self-understanding: "Life is not for me a moral romance derived from the tradition of a pretty fairy-tale"(241). And his humanistic actions belie his dramatic claims of being a cynic. His devotion to Antonia is unquestioned: "There is nothing I would not do for the sake of Antonia. There is nothing I am not prepared to undertake. There is no risk I am not ready to run"(236). Having established himself as a skeptic, Decoud's genuine interest in the political disposition of Sulaco proves embarrassing, so he masks it: "He soothed himself by saying he was not a patriot, but a lover"(194). Yet when Don Juste Lopez, influential member

of the rapidly dissolving Provincial Assembly, speaks of surrender in terms of compromise with the ignoble Montero, Decoud passionately reproves such a policy: "'Do you know. . .what surrender means to you, to your women, to your children, to your property'"(261). Moreover, he practices his humanity on a personal level: "'I buried myself for sometime in fetching water from the cistern for the wounded'" (259). In the unexpected discovery of Senor Hirsch stowed away on the silver-borne lighter, Decoud's intervention saves the despicably fearful Hirsch from an expeditious murder at the hands of Nostromo.

Ironically, despite apparent cynicism Decoud is meaningfully involved with his community, whereas though professing community concern, Gould and Viola unwittingly remain in their self-imposed isolations--Gould under the guise of material interest and Viola under the sway of idealism. Motivated by his love for Antonia to undertake the salvage of silver in the treacherous lighter expedition, Decoud's humanity and apprehension of the nature of life remain evident in the last line of his letter to his sister: "'But no! feeling for you is certainly not dead, and the whole thing, the house, the dark night, the silent children in this dim room, my very presence here--all this is life, must be life, since it is so much like a dream'"(276). It is only later, while floundering aboard the lighter in the death deepened darkness of the gulf, that Decoud consciously

disengages himself from the dream that is life: "Decoud lay on the silver boxes panting. All his active sensations and feelings, from as far back as he could remember, seemed to him the maddest of dreams. Even his passionate devotion to Antonia, into which he had worked himself up out of the depths of his skepticism, had lost all appearance of reality. For a moment he was the prey of an extremely languid but not unpleasant indifference"(296). During his brief stay on the island, Decoud's affected skepticism that found life a dream changes to a self-destructive skepticism that judges life evanescent and purposeless. In his solitude he questions the value of life and the worth of his own existence. As Avrom Fleishman maintains, such consummate skepticism leads to Decoud's loss of identity and concomitant suicide, suggesting that individuality is an illusion, and that reality consists of one's actions within a social milieu predicated on political engagement in history. The absence of such involvement returns the individual to primal nothingness.<sup>26</sup>

Decoud and Nostromo's austere mission reveals how two contrasting personalities respond to the stress of solitude. If the intellectual Decoud ultimately defaults in individual and social responsibility, what of Nostromo, Conrad's "man of the people"? At first glance, Nostromo's incorruptibility

<sup>26</sup>Avrom Fleishman, Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 178.

as leader of the cargadores would seem to distance him from symbolic association with the people. But Decoud puts Nostromo's singularity in perspective: "'Exceptional individualities always interest me, because they are true to the general formula expressing the moral state of humanity'" (273). Exceptional individualities most clearly embody and forcefully promote the values of the group with which they are identified. Nostromo's shared attitudes with the populace that deifies him are reflected in his saddened ruminations over the death of Teresa Viola: "She was dead--may God have her soul! Sharing in the anti-priestly free thought of the masses, his mind used the pious formula from the superficial force of habit, but with a deep-seated sincerity. The popular mind is incapable of skepticism; and that incapacity delivers their helpless strength to the wiles of swindlers and to the pitiless enthusiasms of leaders inspired by visions of a high destiny"(470). Indeed, it was Teresa Viola who constantly assailed Nostromo for being a pawn used by the oligarchs of the material interests: "'Get riches at least for once, you indispensable, admired Gian' Battista, to whom the peace of a dying woman is less than the praise of people who have given you a silly name--and nothing besides--in exchange for your soul and body'"(284). The praise secured by Nostromo from his overlords for his performance in mine-related duties is similar to the satisfaction the masses feel from their association with the



mine: "In a very few years the sense of belonging to a powerful organization had been developed in these harrassed, half-wild Indians. They were proud of, and attached to, the mine. It had secured their confidence and belief. They invested it with a protecting and invincible virtue, as though it were a fetish made by their own hands, for they were ignorant, and in other respects did not differ appreciably from the **rest** of mankind, which puts infinite trust in its own creations"(442).

Nostromo's opportunity to begin community involvement in a substantive way comes to him during his self-confrontation in the gulf episode. Like Decoud, Nostromo is alert to the ambience of the gulf. But Nostromo avoids active soul-searching. Even in the solitude of the gulf he still defines himself according to others' attitudes toward him: "'They shall learn I am just the man they take me for'"(296). The very emptiness of the gulf mocks Nostromo's inflated self-image. Moreover, the common danger of the gulf accentuates the self-absorption of Decoud and Nostromo: "There was no bond of conviction, of common idea; they were merely two adventurers pursuing each his own adventure, involved in the same imminence of deadly peril"(328). Nonetheless, they succeed in hiding the silver on the Great Isabel. In a short exchange on the island before Nostromo leaves Decoud with the silver, Nostromo approaches an awareness of meaningful interaction with his environment. He tells of a peaceful Sunday

he spent on the Great Isabel, referring to the self-renewing water of the rivulet beneath them: "'But the water of this rivulet you hear under your feet is cool and sweet and good, senor, both before and after a smoke'"(330). However, in his surreptitious thievery of the nearby silver, Nostromo is as indifferent to the rivulet as Gould was to the San Tome waterfall. Both men repudiate the purifying potential of the waters to pursue their private passions, which defile the natural setting as well as the peace of their souls.

Sliding down the bank, Nostromo splashes fleetingly along the rivulet, boards the lighter, and merges with the night. He sinks the lighter in the gulf and swims ashore. He awakens the following morning:

Nostromo woke up from a fourteen hours' sleep and arose full length from his lair in the long grass. He stood knee-deep among the whispering undulations of the green blades, with the lost air of a man just born into the world. Handsome, robust, and supple, he threw back his head, flung his arms open, and stretched himself with a slow twist of the waist and a leisurely growling yawn of white teeth; as natural and free from evil in the moment of waking as a magnificent and unconscious wild beast. Then, in the suddenly steadied glance fixed

upon nothing from under a forced frown, appeared the man. (458)

The animal imagery captures how attuned Nostromo is to nature in his awakening semi-consciousness. He experiences a cleansing, a rebirth. Claire Rosenfield sees mythical overtones in Nostromo's dynamic existence and rebirth. In myth, she writes, the hero's journey, be it internal or external, is an attempt to vanquish the monster death. In so doing the hero experiences a knowledge of the unity of existence and its attendant placidity. But he must be reborn to communicate this knowledge to fellow man. This is Nostromo's opportunity. But after his symbolic rebirth, he fails to merge the opposing worlds of his shallow public image and the dark world of the unknown he has been exposed to. This inability to assimilate the illusion-shattering experience of the gulf voyage is pointedly illustrated in the persistence of Nostromo's simplistic mental set, as he is incapable of understanding how Decoud could have left the spade in plain sight of the buried treasure.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Nostromo betrays his opportunity to re-define positively his manner of relating to the community setting. His theft of the hidden silver repudiates his earlier claim that he would not linger on earth after death "like those gringos that haunt the Azuera," and instead completely restricts his

<sup>27</sup>Rosenfield, pp. 67-68.

freedom: "He could never shake off the treasure. His audacity, greater than that of other men, had welded that vein of silver into his life. And the feeling of fearful and ardent subjection, the feeling of his slavery--so irreparable and profound that often in his thoughts he compared himself to the legendary gringos, neither dead nor alive, bound down to their conquest of unlawful wealth on Azuera--weighed heavily on the independent Captain Fidanza. . . ." (588). Nostromo personifies the fabled gringos. In addition, Conrad images Nostromo with his "paradise of snakes" symbol, as Nostromo writhes snake-like in his quest for silver: "His soul died within him at the vision of himself creeping in presently along the ravine, with the smell of earth, of damp foliage in his nostrils--creeping in, determined in a purpose that numbed his breast, and creeping out again loaded with silver, with his ears alert to every sound"(605). Conrad has succeeded in moving from omniscient perusal of the setting and the illusory gringos to a particularized account of an embodied character's interaction with the setting.

I have shown the interdependence of setting and character in Nostromo by isolating features of the physical setting, dramatizing certain characters' tendencies to impose values on the material aspects of the setting, tracing the development of public institutions as an outgrowth of value consensus, and charting the "series of calamities

overtaking private individuals" as the result of the malfunction of the improperly-conceived public institutions. Is Conrad, therefore, revealed as an unqualified pessimist in his creation of Nostromo? On the contrary, Conrad's creation of Emilia Gould inspires hope. Mrs. Gould has the "wisdom of the heart" and the "words it pronounces have the value of acts of integrity, tolerance, and compassion"(74). Unlike many other characters she relates integrally to the setting. Conrad images her with flowers, suggesting her tenderness and potential fecundity. She often lingers in the corridor which has "a restful mysteriousness of a forest shade, suggested by the stems and the leaves of the plants ranged along the balustrade of the open side"(232). Her eyes open wide, "as pretty as pale flowers"(77). Nostromo appreciates her goodness, as he confesses his theft of the silver to her, and she has the piety to renounce the whereabouts of the treasure, while permitting Nostromo's disgrace to die with him. Yet for all her goodness her sphere of influence is limited. She remains largely exiled in her exemplary interaction with the setting: "Small and dainty, as if radiating a light of her own in the deep shade of the interlaced boughs, she resembled a good fairy, weary with a long career of well-doing, touched by the withering suspicion of the uselessness of her labors, the powerlessness of her magic"(581). Indeed, it is the light-dark imagery of an emblazoned sky--the physical setting--coordinated with

Nostromo's awakening, and unfortunately, truncated rebirth that best illustrates the epic events of the novel:

Tints of purple, gold, and crimson were mirrored in the clear water of the harbor. A Long tongue of land, straight as a wall, with the grass-grown ruins of the fort making a sort of rounded green mound, plainly visible from the inner shore, closed its circuit; and beyond, the Placid Gulf repeated those splendors of coloring on a greater scale with a more sombre magnificence. The great mass of cloud filling the head of the gulf had long, red smears among its convoluted folds of gray and black, as of a floating mantle stained with blood. The Three Isabels, overshadowed and clear-cut in a great smoothness confounding the sea and sky, appeared suspended, purple-black, in the air. The little wavelets seemed to be tossing tiny red sparks upon the sandy beaches. The glassy bands of water along the horizon gave out a fiery red glow, as if fire and water had been mingled together in the vast bed of the ocean. (457)

While the opening description of setting was more matter-of-fact, this setting symbolically records what has transpired. The blood-red sky image, cast by the reflection of a setting sun on gathering clouds, occurring as Nostromo awakens, sustains the fall from innocence, reflects back on the

sanguinary disorder in Sulaco, and supports Dr. Monygham's dictum that "there is no peace and no rest in the development of material interests"(571).

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